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OPINION

OPINION

'SHAMEFUL'

The Crack-Era Cop Who Locked Up the Innocent in NYC

Louis Scarcella was celebrated as "one of the best at getting even the worst villains to talk." Now, New York City has been racing to set those "villains" free.



THEODORE HAMM 09.03.17 12:00 AM ET



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PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY THE DAILY BEAST

Mike Baum had his doubts. When David Ranta came to him and said “I didn’t kill the rabbi,” Baum, a veteran Brooklyn defense attorney, shrugged it off. That’s what they all say.

But as they got to talking, Baum quickly realized that he and Ranta had a thing or two in common. Not only were both from Bensonhurst, but Ranta lived in the same Bay Parkway building as Baum’s mother.

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Louie Scarcella, the NYPD detective who extracted Ranta’s confession to the February 1990 murder of rabbi Chaskel Werzburger, grew up about ten blocks away. The judge in Ranta’s 1991 trial, Francis X. Egitto, also hailed from Bensonhurst.

As the case moved along, Baum’s doubts increased, but not about Ranta’s innocence. Instead, he began to wonder about Scarcella. Even so, he tells the Beast, “It was 1991 and nobody yet thought that detectives could be so dirty.”

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Pulitzer Prize winning Daily News columnist Mike McAlary celebrated him as "one of the best at getting even the worst villains to talk."

A quarter-century later, he is now the archetype of that era's dirty detective, with prosecutors and appeals attorneys combing through his old cases to see where innocent people may have gone to jail because of his work — even as prosecutors have taken pains not to legally implicate Scarcella himself in the many wrongful conviction cases he was involved in.

Baum, meanwhile, has a notable record of his own: A lifetime batting average of 1.000 against Scarcella, in four trips to the plate.

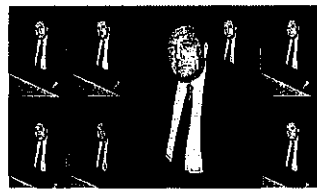
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Ranta's exoneration in March of 2013 cast a spotlight on Scarcella's signature tactics. "One-witness identifications and/or false confessions were his m.o.," says Baum.

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in the one witness, then secured Washington's disputed confession—made it the twelfth Scarcella-tied case where a conviction has been overturned by the DA (or judges) in the last four years.

So far, though, the office — under new DA Ken Thompson and now Acting DA Eric Gonzalez, a 20-year veteran of the office who took over after Thompson's death from cancer and is now running for election to a full term — has come up with ways to free the people Scarcella helped wrongfully convict without finding any criminal wrongdoing by the detective, who retired in 1999. Because the relevant statute of limitations has expired, Scarcella would not face charges, but it's abundantly clear that he played a pivotal, shady role in numerous cases.

Gonzalez has pointed to the Conviction Review Unit launched by Thompson, and which has so far exonerated 23 people (eight in Scarcella cases), as a key reason why he should be elected to a full term this fall. But the office first began looking into its own questionable cases late in the Joe Hynes era, which lasted from 1990 to 2013, when Thompson defeated Hynes in his bid for a seventh term.

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In 2010, a federal judge overturned Jabbar Collins' 1995 conviction for the murder of a different Williamsburg rabbi, declaring the strong-arm tactics of Michael Vecchione—one of Hynes' top prosecutors—to be "shameful."

After first resisting wider inquiries into the office's wrongdoing, Hynes eventually changed course. According to Baum, the DA visited Brooklyn Defender Services in December 2011 and asked for cases that merited review. Baum brought up Ranta, and a few months later was informed by Taylor Koss of Hynes' Conviction Integrity Unit that an inquiry was underway.

Ranta had been convicted in 1991 of murdering Rabbi Werzburger, an Auschwitz survivor, in a case that had sent shockwaves throughout Brooklyn's Hasidic community. Hynes, then the newly elected DA, had originally intended to prosecute the case himself, before changing his mind and handing it off to a top deputy.

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On paper, it seemed like a strong case, with a handful of witnesses pointing to Ranta —and there was a confession. But as Baum explains, Ranta had requested to make a phone call during his interrogation, and Scarcella told him that he had to sign a manila folder in order to do so. On that folder, Scarcella wrote out Ranta's purported confession, which wrapped around Ranta's actual signature. As Baum recalls, in the statement Ranta tells Louie, his fellow Bensonhurst native, that "You broke my heart when you talked about the old neighborhood."

Scarcella received the Chief of Detectives' Award for Outstanding Police Investigation for his work on that Werzburger case, using dubious maneuvers by no means limited to it. Of Ranta's confession, McAlary wrote that Scarcella and his partner "captured a man who confessed to the crime. The suspect was convicted by his own words.... It is an art, a cop art."

Or, as Scarcella put it in a recent deposition pertaining to a different exoneration, he always wrote suspects' confessions in his own hand because "I found that it makes them very uncomfortable" to do so themselves.

In March 2013, as Hynes' reelection campaign against Thompson began to take shape, his Conviction Integrity Unit asked a judge to release Ranta. Key witnesses had recanted, they said, and the real killer had been identified. Six weeks later — after the city had agreed to pay Ranta \$6.4 million before he even filed a lawsuit for his 23 years wrongfully spent behind bars — Hynes announced that the Conviction Integrity Unit would reopen at least 50 Scarcella cases.

"I have to be a pretty smart guy to lock someone up, get it through the DA's office, get it through a trial and jury, and convict a guy," Scarcella told the Times. Baum agrees that Scarcella had plenty of help from sympathetic prosecutors, but deems it "crazy" that Gonzalez now seems determined to let him off the hook. Louie, he says, is "very smart."

Although his biological father is Italian, Baum grew up in a Jewish household. Such were the two dominant ethnicities in postwar Bensonhurst. Ranta (and later Baum's mother) lived in the same building where Elliot Gould grew up.

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graduated from high school in 1969—Baum from New Utrecht, Scarcella from Midwood.

Their paths didn't cross directly until the Ranta case, after which they faced each other in three more homicide cases in the early 1990s. Separate juries quickly acquitted Baum's clients Vladimir Vincent and Joseph Williams, and another convicted Ronald Poindexter (but an appeals court overturned it).

Scarcella hauled in a cross-section of characters to finger the accused. In the Vincent case, the single witness had eyesight like Mr. Magoo. To identify Williams, Scarcella relied on a crack-addicted prostitute who died just before the trial. And in Poindexter's case, the main witness, a teenage girl, later recanted, saying she had been threatened by the detective.

Even so, Baum calls Scarcella the "most formidable witness I ever had on the stand. Tough, smooth. He has a terrific memory and never incriminated himself." A sharp dresser, athletic, and charming, Scarcella wooed Brooklyn prosecutors and jurors alike during his 18 years as a detective, when he was involved in nearly 250 cases.

Though he ultimately won all four of his cases against the flashy detective, Baum says he'd be happier about that record "if David Ranta wasn't locked up for 23 years and Ronny Poindexter for five."

At a recent deposition in the case of Vanessa Gathers, who was exonerated by Ken Thompson's Conviction Review Unit in early 2016, Scarcella explained his method of interrogations, which he insists on calling "interviews." Like Jabbar Washington, the most recent Scarcella exoneree, Gathers had testified at her trial that Scarcella had coerced her into a false confession.

Lisa Cahill, Gathers' attorney, repeatedly asked the detective to explain any training or methods that provided the basis of his "interview" technique. According to Scarcella, his only source of instruction was the "advice" he received from his father, also a career NYPD homicide detective. Pressed to clarify the specific nature of that advice, Scarcella said: "Treat people with respect, don't lie. Remember they have mothers and fathers and what have you."

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confession erroneously stated the murder victim was in a wheelchair.

As the number of Scarcella-related exonerations continues to grow, Baum no longer has any doubts about whom to believe. "We all know now that Scarcella is a liar."

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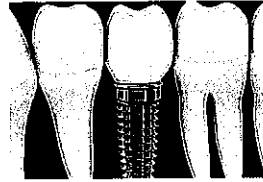
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WHO IS Q?

Roseanne Keeps Promoting QAnon, the Pro-Trump Conspiracy Theory That Makes Pizzagate Look Tame

She's been tweeting a fringe conspiracy, leading some fans to question whether she had been kidnapped and replaced with an imposter.



KELLY WEILL 03.30.18 5:09 AM ET



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But as recently as November, Barr fans were speculating that the Trump-supporting actress had secretly been taken out and swapped with an imposter as part of a massive “deep state” conspiracy.

Barr’s 1990s show about a blue-collar Illinois family spent 21 years off air before returning Tuesday to a massive viewership of more than 18 million. Since the show’s last episode in 1997, Barr’s politics have taken a sharp turn right, with the actress voicing her support for Trump as well as a number of fringe conspiracy theories. In November, she became a bit player in one of her favorite theories: a 4Chan-based conspiracy called QAnon that alleges satanism and sex-trafficking by Trump’s opponents.

“who is Q?” Barr tweeted the morning of Nov. 17.

“tell Qanon to DM me in the nexxt 24 hours,” she tweeted hours later.

“Q” or “QAnon” refers to a user on the anonymous message board 4chan. The user claims to be a high-ranking government official with inside knowledge of the White House where, he claims, Trump is planning mass arrests of top Democrats for allegedly being involved in a satanic child-sex-trafficking ring. Or something. QAnon’s messages have always been vague to the point of near-gibberish, opening them to interpretation. When QAnon has given specifics—like the time he claimed John Podesta would be arrested or indicted Nov. 3—the prediction has fallen flat.

Days after that failed prophecy, Barr was on Twitter asking her followers to put her in touch with QAnon. Then, in what believers interpreted as confirmation of the QAnon theory, Barr’s internet presence went dark. Her Twitter account appeared to be suspended for several hours, and her website went offline for “technical reasons” according to a notice on the homepage.

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Cynthia Nixon

Coming back to bite him

"Roseanne had been talking about Q mostly all day and asking him to contact her, now," one Redditor in the r/conspiracies subreddit wrote of Barr's disappearance from Twitter, and claiming it confirmed the QAnon conspiracy. "I am viewing this as vindication."

Barr was back online hours later.

"guys! i am OK! I'm here-thank you for worrying," she wrote. "I am OK and back. explanation later on-"



"Q claims to be a high-ranking government official with inside knowledge of the White House where, he claims, Trump is planning mass arrests of top Democrats for allegedly being involved in a satanic child-sex-trafficking ring."

She never appeared to offer the explanation. Redditors noted that Barr had lost more than 200,000 followers during her brief disappearance. The apparent purge suggests Barr's account may have been flagged as having fake followers. Twitter does not comment on individual accounts, and a representative for Barr did not return The Daily Beast's request for comment.

As for the technical difficulties on her website, DomainTools shows the website underwent a semi-regular maintenance procedure that day. Like many celebrities, Barr registers her website through a privacy-protecting service. The service registers the website under randomly generated email proxies, which change every few months. One of those occasional changes occurred Nov. 17, potentially causing technical difficulties or suggesting other technical work on the site that briefly took it offline.

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But even with Barr returned, some fans were suspicious that an imposter had replaced her. "How do we know its you?" one tweeted at the returned Roseanne.

"Let us know that you are really back," another tweeted. "Give us a real sign that will let us know it really is you."

Redditors theorized that Barr had suspended herself to draw attention to QAnon. "Conspiracyception: She deleted her account to make it seem like Twitter is cooked," one wrote.

The month after her brief disappearance, Barr deleted all her tweets and announced a temporary Twitter retirement after a knock-down fight with Hillary Clinton supporters on the website.



Roseanne Barr
@therealroseanne

MKULTRA

2:15 PM - Mar 24, 2018

4,707 2,184 people are talking about this

She was back in January, and has since resumed tweeting about QAnon, in apparent contradiction of fans who had previously claimed Twitter was censoring her conspiracy tweets. Since Friday, she has tweeted or retweeted content relating to QAnon (or its other name "The Storm") at least four times, in addition to a March 24 tweet that read "MKULTRA," the name of a 1960s CIA mind-control program. The context for the tweet was not clear.

Her most recent post about QAnon is a retweeted clip of Stephen Colbert welcoming then-candidate Donald Trump onto his show. "You are not supposed to see this video," the video, which is tagged with a QAnon hashtag is captioned.

The clip, in fact, aired during Colbert's CBS show. Barr retweeted it early Thursday. Hours earlier, she and Trump had spoken on the phone.



baselessly claim voted in the presidential election,” The Daily Beast’s Amy Zimmerman previously reported. Barr has also pushed conspiracy theories about murdered Democratic National Committee staffer Seth Rich, whom some truthers believe was killed in a Clinton-ordered hit.

Barr's politics have also tended toward the fringes. In 2009, Barr (who is Jewish) posed for a photoshoot in the Jewish youth magazine *Heeb*, in which she dressed as Hitler eating singed, human-shaped "Jew cookies." The magazine, which labeled Barr "the last celebrity utterly incapable of giving a fuck" later pulled the photo spread.

In 2012, she launched a presidential campaign as a Green Party candidate but lost to Jill Stein in the primary. Since then, Barr's views have veered right with blatantly Islamophobic tweets. In an August 2016 Twitter rant, she claimed "jew hater hillary clinton's handler huma weiner is a filthy nazi whore."

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